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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000130

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SUBJECT: EU DCMS ON QUICKENING PACE OF BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION

CARACAS 00000130 001.2 OF 002

Summary

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¶1. (C) Key EU DCMS based in Caracas analyze the general situation in Venezuela almost exactly as we do, seeing Chavez as increasingly moving to accrue all power to the executive and silence independent voices, in violation of democratic norms. The Caracas HOMs have recommended that Brussels approve a troika demarche to the BRV on the proposed closure of the RCTV television station, having concluded that Chavez is censoring the station for its political viewpoint. Some EU missions here argue for even more energetic actions in support of freedom, but others -- notably the Italian -- fail to understand the fundamental nature of Chavez' "revolution."

So long as that is true, a strong consensus in favor of democracy here will elude the EU. Finally, it is possible that these DCMS are more negative on Chavez than their ambassadors, so there may be some space between what they say and what they can deliver. End summary.

¶2. (C) DCM met with the French (Jose Gomez), British (Sue Breeze), German (Rolf Herden), and Spanish (Ignacio Aguirre de Carcer) DCMS on January 17 to talk over current developments in Venezuela and to determine what plans they had for addressing the decision by President Chavez to close Radio Caracas Television (RCTV).

BRV Going South

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¶3. (C) The Euro-DCMs were united in their view that there has been a frank and rapid deterioration in the environment in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) since the first of the year. Chavez seems committed to a much more radical approach, undermining the fundamental bases of democracy. Chavez is moving to install himself in power for life, to dispense with representative democracy, to take control of the economy, and to circumscribe freedom of expression. In the Euros' view, he appears to be acting without consulting even very senior BRV advisors. For example, the minister of petroleum was not consulted on the gas nationalization plan Chavez laid out on January 10. Chavez is now acting without any restraints, and wants to demonstrate that he is establishing an authentic and irreversible "revolutionary" process here. French DCM Gomez said the GOF was particularly worried about Chavez' increasingly dictatorial (Gomez' word) bent. He drew specific reference to the omnibus enabling law, which would permit Chavez to legislate by "decree-law," without consulting with the National Assembly or civil

society.

¶4. (C) German DCM Herden played out a theory that Chavez appears to have no one who can steer him away from bad ideas, increasing the possibility of radical or wrongheaded policy approaches. He argued that ex-VP Jose Vincent Rangel had served that role, but Rangel has been dropped entirely from the government. The Euro-DCMs bemoaned in particular his loss as an interlocutor, even on low-level matters. With Rangel gone, none of them knew who to turn to in the increasingly stovepiped BRV. In this regard, Herden cited a great tentativeness in the BRV in dealing with the Europeans in general, including with Germany, which is now the EU presidency country. Herden also noted that when the FRG took over as presidency country, the embassy here sent a letter to Chavez asking for a meeting for the troika; after the new cabinet was announced on January 8, the embassy sent letters requesting troika courtesy calls on all major ministers. To date they have received no response whatsoever. In the past, they could have followed up, or at least figured out what was going on, by contacting Rangel.

Caracas HOMs suggest demarche on RCTV  
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¶5. (C) The Euro-DCMs said that there was no suggestion by the Heads of Mission (HOMs) here (who met on January 16) to move for a common position on Venezuela generally, nor did they believe that Brussels on its own would suggest such a move. They noted, as has USEU, that there is no consensus within the EU on the true nature of the Bolivarian regime here -- although they believed that Chavez' recent radicalization would have to be taken into account by EU members inclined to put a positive gloss on the BRV's actions.

¶6. (C) Nonetheless, the HOMs here suggested a specific action with respect to the planned BRV closure of the RCTV

CARACAS 00000130 002.2 OF 002

television station. The HOMs concluded that the BRV plans to sanction RCTV because of its political views, which is directly contrary to standard democratic practice, and required action. For that reason, the HOMs had proposed to Brussels that the Committee of EU Council for Latin America (COLAT) approve a troika demarche to the highest levels of the BRV (shooting for Chavez, hoping for FM Maduro) to privately express grave concerns and to urge that the BRV rethink the issue. The Spanish DCM noted that the Czech Ambassador had successfully pressed for quite tough language in the private demarche. According to the Europeans, the COLAT was to have met January 17 to consider the demarche recommendation.

¶7. (C) The Euro-DCMs then engaged in an interesting colloquy about next steps on RCTV. Spanish DCM Aguirre argued that Chavez would blow off the private demarche, and that while it was a necessary step, the EU should be thinking now about follow-on actions. Aguirre stated the case for a strongly-worded public statement. The French and German DCMs disagreed, the former arguing for a step-by-step approach and the latter arguing that they had time to work the issue, since the license will not be pulled until May, according to Chavez.

Comment  
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¶8. (C) The Euros -- at least these DCMs from key missions -- see the situation here almost exactly as we do. Their proposed approach to the BRV on the RCTV issue is the right thing to do, and Aguirre's suggestion that they need to think now about next steps is wise. That said, there are embassies here, notably the Italian mission, that fail to understand the fundamental nature and direction of Chavez and his "revolution." So long as that is true, a strong consensus in

favor of democracy here will elude the EU. Finally, the new British Ambassador has not yet arrived, and the Spanish, German, and even French DCMs may be more negative on Chavez than their ambassadors, so there may be some space between what these four say and what they can deliver from their embassies.

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